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Edited by DEXTER PERKINS, *City Historian*
and BLAKE MCKELVEY, *Assistant City Historian*

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WAR ON LAKE ONTARIO: 1812-1815

By RUTH MARSH and DOROTHY S. TRUESDALE

Peaceful Lake Ontario was once patrolled by hostile fleets. The modern Rochesterian finds this difficult to visualize; yet it seems even more incongruous that the enemy should have been British. Today the habit of concord makes it hard for us to identify our present gallant ally with the arrogant and imperial mother country which then seemed to thwart our fondest ambitions and threaten our cherished "rights." Confident of our own unity and strength, we have lost our adolescent fear of being scorned as an upstart among the nations. It seems impossible that an Englishman should ever have written: "We might as reasonably dread the effects of combinations among the German as among the American states, and deprecate the resolves of the Diet, as those of Congress."¹ We look back even upon the Revolution as essentially a contest between kindred peoples, who down the long years of history have sought by different means the same end.

Europe's War Confronts America

Yet the years 1812, 1813, 1814 found Britain and America again at war. It was a strange, fratricidal conflict. Like the Revolution, it partook of the character of a civil war, not only because the opponents were of much the same blood and tradition, but because within each of the contesting nations various groups were at loggerheads as to the issues at stake. In those days the States were none too firmly united. Each of them was still jealous of its own petty sovereignty. Differ-

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ences of opinion, sectional and partisan, threatened to rend the young nation into fragments.

It was difficult, indeed, for the people of the United States to agree upon any policy by which they might successfully cope with the situation confronting them. For then, as now, the world was at war. The bold dreamer, Napoleon, seemed to have the conquest of all Europe within his reach. Britain alone had consistently held out against him. To a partisan in such a duel, the liberties of American seamen and ships were a mere pawn in the game. Whichever way America turned, she could expect scant consideration. England, who had once nourished and controlled the maritime development of America's Atlantic seaboard in her own interest, felt it bitter that these sons of hers should now furnish the continental enemy with the sinews of trade. Napoleon was equally determined that America should not co-operate with the British strategy of hemming him in by sea. If Britain was the greater offender, it was because she was more powerful on the ocean. Napoleon's intentions were not more friendly. As is well known, it was completely impossible for an American trading vessel to comply both with Napoleon's Decrees and with Britain's Orders in Council, except by staying at home. In such circumstances, it was scarcely characteristic of New Englanders to stay at home. If the risks were great, so were the profits. The risks were taken. Large profits were made, but some American property was lost.

Infringements upon human rights, however, are not so easily compensated as infringements upon property rights. Both England and France seized American cargoes, but it was England, the mistress of the seas, who was in a position to seize American men. Desperately in need of able-bodied seamen for their under-manned ships, accustomed to "press" into service reluctant British subjects, her naval captains were not always inclined to consider "due process of law" necessary to distinguish an American rebel from a British deserter. Here was an infringement upon American sovereignty which was scarcely adjustable in terms of pounds sterling. The dispute was aggravated by a fundamental disagreement as to the nature of citizenship, for the British looked upon the process of naturalization as an unjustified American innovation.

Years of neutrality failed to allay these grievances. America's attempts at commercial coercion, beginning with the embargo in 1807,

displayed the inadequacy of the federal government's power to control even its own citizens, let alone the nations of Europe. If European decrees had not kept New England's ships at home, neither did American laws.

At long last, the President and the majority of the Congress of the United States decided upon war. This is not the place to settle the historians' debate as to whether America would have commenced hostilities in 1812 if maritime rights alone had been at stake.² Congressman John Randolph's charge has echoed down the years:

Sir, if you go to war it will not be for the protection of, or defence of your maritime rights. Gentlemen from the North have been taken up to some high mountain and shown all the kingdoms of the earth; and Canada seems tempting in their sight. That rich vein of Genesee land, which [sic] is said to be even better on the other side of the lake than on this. Agrarian cupidity not maritime right urges this war.³

The charge is not groundless. Many westward-looking Americans thought it only natural that Canada should one day become a part of the Union. They thought of its British rulers and merchants as grudge-bearing enemies, intriguing with the Indians of the American West. They thought of Canada's ordinary inhabitants as liberty-loving farmers like themselves, many of them American-born, ready to throw off the British yoke the moment assistance was proffered. Their picture of the situation was distorted, but many historians believe that the distortion was the fundamental cause of America's declaration of war in 1812.

Other historians, however, believe that the maritime issues were critical. They point out the logic in Monroe's statement that, "In case of war it might be necessary to invade Canada, *not as an object of the war but as a means to bring it to a satisfactory conclusion.*"⁴ As one of them puts it: "Britain had injured the United States on the high seas, where she was invincible. To challenge her there would be to court defeat. . . . The only way to make Britain submit was to strike her where she was vulnerable—in the provinces adjoining on the north. . . . The prevailing thought was that the United States was potentially supreme on land, as Britain was actually supreme on the sea. . . . The conquest of Canada was anticipated as the seizure of

a hostage rather than as the capture of a prize." ⁵ Whatever the true interpretation of the causes of the war, two facts seem substantiated: if America was to fight Britain, for whatever reason, it was logical that Canada should be invaded; to many Americans, Southerners and Westerners, this necessity was by no means painful.

To many other Americans, however, the prospect of war with Great Britain was distinctly painful. England was not only their best customer. She seemed also, to them, the champion of Anglo-Saxon liberty and law against the tyrant Napoleon. This view prevailed in New England, both before and after the declaration of war. Opinion in our own state of New York was split. The governor of the state, Daniel D. Tompkins, furthered the prosecution of the war with greater energy than that displayed by the War Department. But elections to the state legislature during the years preceding the conflict indicated a wavering and divided public opinion, with no clear majority either way. The western counties of the state—including the territory which later became Monroe County—sent to Congress Peter B. Porter of Black Rock, who became well-known as a War Hawk, advocating the conquest of Canada. Yet many a settler in his district felt scant sympathy with the Representative's view. War had little to offer them. As a modern student of frontier history says: "Eastward of Buffalo it was difficult to find much war enthusiasm. To residents along the shore of Lake Ontario or the St. Lawrence, or even farther within New York, the British of Canada appeared less in the guise of miscreants than in that of friendly traders. . . . Such people, naturally, were not friendly to the thought of war with England, or very likely to help the cause. Others feared a positive commercial disadvantage in the annexation of Canada to the United States, no matter how easily effected. Thus Mr. D. A. Ogden, who owned a plantation on the St. Lawrence river, stated in 1811 that he 'would regret much (between ourselves) that Quebec should not remain in the possession of the English. They charge us no Duties,' he continued, 'upon Exports down the River, and our produce being shipped from Canada as the products of a British Colony, we obtain the Bounty, or Discriminating Duties. On the Article of Pot and Pearl Ashes—the difference is equal to \$20 per ton—which renders these articles worth \$10 more in Montreal than New York—and on Lumber the difference is much greater'." ⁶ We may imagine that the few settlers on the lower Gene-

see shared these sentiments, since flour, pork, potash, and staves were shipped from the mouth of the river across the lake and down to Montreal. If they thought beyond their own problems at all, many of them doubtless agreed with Mr. Bemis, publisher of the *Ontario Repository* at Canandaigua, that Napoleon was their real enemy.

Indeed the indifference of the common man, or even his hostility, hampered the efforts of those charged with the conduct of this war on both sides of the Great Lakes border. For it may be noted in passing that public opinion in Upper Canada was quite as wavering and divided as in New York State. Many of the inhabitants were American by birth. Some of them, to be sure, had fled to Canada as Loyalists, but others had simply gone seeking land, which was there offered on liberal terms without too-close questioning as to a man's allegiance. Thus we find capable General Brock, who had been attempting to win some sort of co-operation from the parliament of Upper Canada, writing in July of 1812:

There can be no doubt that a large portion of the population in this neighbourhood are sincere in their professions to defend the country, but it appears likewise evident to me that the greater part are either indifferent to what is passing, or so completely American as to rejoice in the prospects of a change of Governments. Many who now consider our means inadequate would readily take an active part were the regular troops increased—these cool calculators are numerous in all societies.⁷

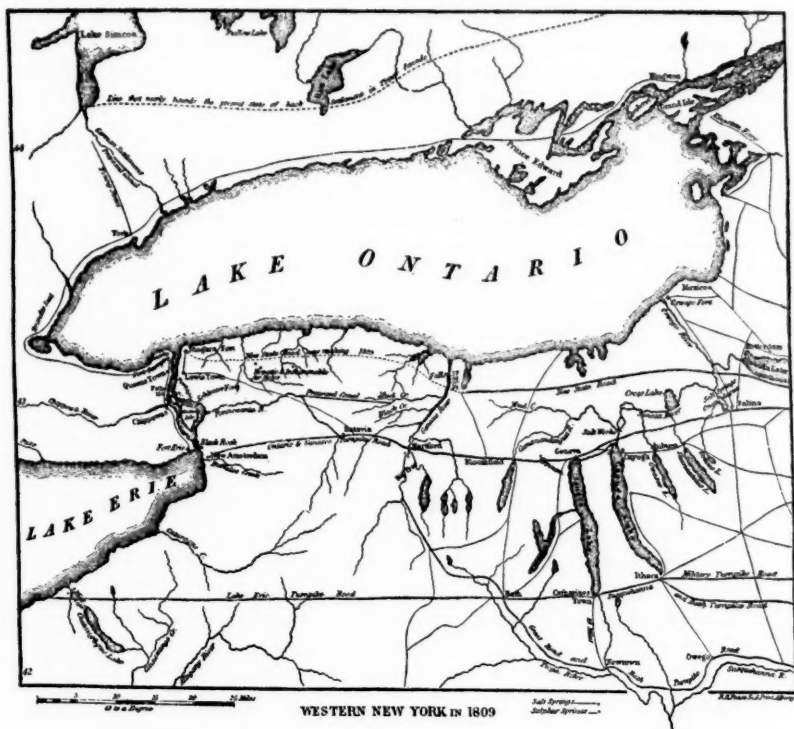
On the American side of the border, it was scarcely to be expected that this indifference would be dispelled by the ineffectual leadership given. The officers not only failed to discipline the militia; they could not agree among themselves. Not only did they fail to formulate a sound strategy for the conduct of the war as a whole; they could not even decide upon a common policy on the short stretch of the Niagara frontier from Lake Erie to Lake Ontario. Witness the blundering attempt of the militia at Lewiston, late in 1812, to take Queenston Heights across the river. Precipitated by the impatience of the men, imperilled by the last-minute cowardice of many of them, this venture was made hopeless by the refusal to co-operate of the commanding officer of the regular troops stationed upstream at Black Rock. This, on a small scale, symbolizes the failure of the American nation.

Commanders along the Canadian frontier from Detroit to New England acted as if they individually were responsible for the general strategy of the war. Some New Englanders went further, and tried to take into their own hands the decision as to whether a war should be fought at all. Spared from blockade by the British, they traded with the enemy by sea and land. (The British army on the St. Lawrence was largely nourished from south of the border.)

The assault on Queenston was by no means the only fiasco of 1812. Earlier in the year Detroit had been taken and the rest of the American West threatened. In November a feeble attempt to invade the St. Lawrence area collapsed ignominiously. On the lakes, neither side had as yet even attempted much, until in September Captain Isaac Chauncey was summoned from the New York Navy Yard to see what might be done. Up to that time the British had been in a somewhat superior position on both lakes.

The Great Lakes Highway at Stake

It may not seem obvious today that the control of Lakes Erie and Ontario should have been crucial for the victory of American arms. But in 1812 the transport of supplies by land, on either side of the lakes, was extremely difficult, well-nigh impossible in the case of heavy pieces of ordnance. Roads were few and poor. In 1810, for example, salt could be transported up the lake from Oswego to Lewiston on the Niagara for five shillings a barrel, but the portage from Lewiston to Black Rock (near Buffalo) added six shillings to the price.⁸ In time of peace it would have seemed quite illogical to unload goods from Oswego or Sackett's Harbor at the mouth of the Genesee River, in order to transport them to the Niagara frontier via Batavia or the Ridge Road—"singular natural turnpike" though the latter might be.⁹ Yet precisely this seems to have been necessary from time to time during the war years, when the control of Lake Ontario was in dispute. On at least one occasion, it was necessary for troops to march overland all the way from the Niagara frontier to Sackett's Harbor, passing the sites of Rochester, Utica, and Syracuse, because Commodore Chauncey could not leave another part of the lake unguarded.¹⁰ The British were even more dependent upon control of the lakes, "for the reason," as Admiral Mahan points out



with reference to a particular incident, "that an effective American army on the Niagara had a land line of communication, bad but possible, alternate to the lake. The British had not.¹¹ Thus when late in 1812 Chauncey discovered that his activities had forced British troops to march overland from Kingston to Toronto and had also kept supplies from reaching Fort George, he had reason to feel that his energetic efforts to organize an American fleet on Lake Ontario had been well worth while.

It was not left for future historians, gifted with the wisdom of hindsight, to point out the critical importance of the line of communications extending down the St. Lawrence and the lakes. Both

the British General Brock on the Niagara frontier and the American General Hull at Detroit recognized very early that the maintenance of their respective positions depended upon control of this route¹² as indeed the French and the British had in their intermittent struggle several decades before.

Yet the beginning of the war had found both the British and the Americans thoroughly unprepared on the lakes. The Americans had one brig, the *Oneida*, on Lake Ontario. Launched early in 1809, this vessel had been intended primarily for use in the enforcement of the early embargo acts.¹³ Otherwise, the American lake fleet was substantially nonexistent. Construction was commenced on two new ships for Lake Ontario. The *Madison* was ready to be launched in November 26, 1812, having been constructed in record time, nine weeks. In addition, a number of merchant vessels were purchased for conversion into "gun-boats." Similar preparations were made by the Americans on Lake Erie and by the British on both lakes. The fleets which resulted were queerly compounded of naval vessels of the latest construction, intended for use in hostilities, together with vessels built for the uses of peace, with guns newly mounted on their decks. The naval vessels being much more powerful weapons than the converted schooners, it became the object of each side to out-construct, quite as much as to out-sail and out-shoot the enemy.

On Lake Ontario, both the American "Commodore" Chauncey and the British "Commodore" Yeo (who arrived in the spring of 1813) were cautious men. Each was anxious to keep his own fleet in being until he could be certain of overpowering the enemy. If one of them had a new vessel under construction, he was apt to delay action until it should be completed. Throughout the entire war, neither was willing to risk battle unless he was quite sure of winning. The outcome was rather like a game of tag. "Home" for the British was their naval base at Kingston, near the outlet of Lake Ontario into the St. Lawrence. For the Americans it was Sackett's Harbor, in a corresponding position on the south side of the lake.

It was this aspect of the war which most vitally concerned settlers on the lower Genesee. They followed with interest the news and rumors which reached them from the Niagara battlefield, eighty miles to the west, but the contest on Lake Ontario was brought home

to them more directly. Through it they were to learn that even the most remote frontier settlement could not permanently ignore what happened half-way around the world; long before the days of telegraph and radio, the reverberations of an invasion of Russia reached to the falls of the Genesee.

War Comes to the Genesee

The news that the American Congress had declared war on Great Britain arrived in Canandaigua on June 25, 1812—a week after the event. The proprietor of the *Ontario Repository*—whose views can scarcely have made him welcome the information—hurried to get out a handbill to spread the news to the frontier hamlets. But whether the tidings reached the forest cabins about the Genesee falls via the *Repository* or its rival, the *Ontario Messenger*, we do not know. More likely it came by the frontier grapevine, passing by word of mouth over the forest trails from one lonely cabin to another. We may imagine the consternation it caused. But we may also imagine that soon the settlers turned back to their own pursuits, finding business as usual not too greatly upset by "Mr. Madison's war." For some time it did not greatly affect their lives.

Two of the vessels purchased for the Ontario fleet, the *Genesee Packet* and the *Experiment*, had formerly been engaged in trade between the Genesee River and the St. Lawrence. Doubtless these were the schooners which Chauncey, in the fall of 1812, ordered a subordinate to equip for war at the mouth of the Genesee River.¹⁴

Apparently the new naval vessels had sailed away by October, for no mention of them is made in the story of the first raid, made that month, by the British fleet on the harbor of the Genesee. While the *Royal George* stood off shore, two boats with about seventy men came into the harbor, cut out two American vessels anchored there, and towed them off. One of these was a United States revenue cutter; the other was a schooner, the *Lady Murray*, owned by Captain William M'Kinistry of Penfield. Her sails and rigging were stored in a warehouse, and, discovering the schooner's lack of equipment, the British returned the next day to get it. No other private property was taken except two gallons of whisky which Mr. Spaulding, the storekeeper, offered the sailors if they would leave the rest of

the barrel intact. As we are told they agreed to this arrangement, we are left with the picture of Mr. Spaulding passing around the mugs, and no doubt sampling his stock with the good-natured foe.

Our only other report of naval activity off the Genesee in 1812 is the story told many years later by an eye-witness, Donald McKenzie. Late in 1812, when he was visiting relatives near the mouth of the Genesee, he heard a report that a British fleet was approaching the river. Cannon-fire was heard, the fleet sighted, and one shot fired toward the very spot from which McKenzie had chosen to view the scene. Just what connection this incident had with the main struggle for Lake Ontario we do not know, for McKenzie only recalled that the squadron then sailed away, "without landing or doing any injury." Apparently the incident was never recorded in naval history.¹⁵

In the spring of 1813 Chauncey felt that his fleet was strong enough to co-operate offensively with the American army. It would doubtless have been wisest to attack the British near their base of communications, in Kingston or Montreal. Actually the attempt was made, not where the British would be most seriously hurt, but where they might most easily be overpowered. In April, York (modern Toronto) was successfully raided. Late in May, Chauncey took part with the army in an attack on Fort George, the British stronghold at the mouth of the Niagara River opposite the American Fort Niagara. The venture was successful, and the fort was occupied. But meanwhile the British Commodore had the rest of Lake Ontario largely to himself. On the very day when the assault upon Fort George was launched, he attacked Sackett's Harbor. Luckily for the Americans, he failed to take the place. Then he went sailing up and down the lake, employing his vessels "in maintaining the communications of the British and harassing those of the Americans, thus observing the true relation of the lake to the hostilities."¹⁶ On the 8th of June he raided the enemy's camp at Forty-mile Creek, capturing "all of his camp equipage, provisions, stores, etc." as well as "all his batteaux, laden with stores, etc." On the 13th he captured two schooners and some boats, carrying American supplies. From them he learned that there was a depot of provisions at the Genesee River. Accordingly he sailed for that place. He appeared off the river mouth with his squadron of six vessels, and sent 150 men ashore.

The few inhabitants of the village offered no resistance. They were shut up in one or two buildings to prevent their warning the rest of the countryside, but were otherwise unmolested. The British carried off between four and five hundred barrels of flour and pork comprising government stores in the warehouse of Frederick Bushnell and, in addition, a large boat anchored in the harbor with twelve hundred bushels of grain for the American army. According to tradition, the British officer in charge of the landing carefully gave a receipt for the goods to George Latta, Bushnell's clerk. In spite of the British precaution, word of the raid leaked out and eighty Penfield militia arrived at Charlotte the next morning. But they were too late. The fleet had already sailed for Sodus, the next point to be raided, where it captured six hundred barrels of flour and pork.¹⁷

Thus Yeo's fleet "ranged the lake at will" until July 2, when he returned to Kingston. Some three weeks later his American rival, having a new ship in service, felt that he could once more contest British control of the lake. There followed a period of ten or twelve weeks during which each of the wary commanders sought battle—but each on his own terms. The two fleets were so matched that each was superior in certain respects to the other. The Americans had more ships, mounting more guns, but the British fleet was less heterogeneous; more of its vessels had been built for combat, so that the fleet could maneuver more swiftly. Consequently an occasion which seemed to Chauncey suitable for battle might seem unfavorable to Yeo, and vice versa. Three times the fleets actually met and exchanged fire, once off Niagara, once off the Genesee, and once off York, but each time one of the commanders, unwilling to fight the battle to a decisive conclusion, ran for shelter, the other commander failing to follow up his advantage with appropriate speed.¹⁸

Residents on the Genesee, then as now, found the second of these engagements of the greatest interest. On the 11th of September, the British fleet lay becalmed off the Genesee. "The inhabitants at Charlotte," wrote an early historian, "supposed the fleet had anchored preparatory to another landing, expresses were sent into the country; men armed and unarmed flocked from the backwoods settlements, and in a few hours a considerable number of men collected ready to fight or to run, as chances of invasion should make it expedient. While anxiously watching the British fleet, expecting

every moment to see their boats coming toward the shore, a light breeze sprang up, and, soon after, the fleet of Commodore Chauncey was seen rounding Bluff Point. It was a welcome advent."¹⁹ This, it seemed, was to be a battle, not another raid. For once Chauncey had the "weather gauge" of the British. There was great excitement on shore as the Americans opened fire and the British guns replied. Smoke hid the squadrons from view, as the roar of the cannon was heard by settlers far inland. Some of the guns of the American squadron had a longer range than the British, so that by keeping at a respectful distance Chauncey could annoy the enemy without great risk to his own vessels. Yeo, according to his own account, found the wind so unfavorable that he could not force the Americans to fight at closer range. The upshot was a long, running fight down Lake Ontario, the British heading for Amherst Bay, where Chauncey's pilots, unacquainted with the shoals, did not dare to follow. The spectators on shore were left in doubt as to the outcome. For a time it was hoped that the American squadron had at last freed the Ontario coast from the fear of future attack. But by the end of September, it was gloomily concluded that this objective had not been attained, and disappointment quite dimmed rejoicings over Perry's victory on Lake Erie.²⁰

For Commodore Perry, meanwhile, on the day preceding the engagement off the Genesee, had happily disregarded Chauncey's advice that "in all attempts upon the fleet you ought to use great caution, for the loss of a single vessel may decide the fate of the campaign."²¹ His boldness won America superiority on Lake Erie. The British line of communications was cut. Points to the westward had to be abandoned. Attempts to cut that line closer to its source, however, had failed. American land forces might hold the Niagara frontier on both sides of the river, but their tenure was insecure.

It was so insecure that the Americans themselves saw fit gradually to withdraw their troops from Fort George in order to effect a concentration at Sackett's Harbor. Chauncey was called upon to aid in securing this concentration. Some of the troops he transported himself. Others, as we have noted, found it necessary to march overland. In December, finally, Fort George was abandoned. General McClure felt that he had been left too few troops to hold the place.

Not desiring to leave behind him a haven for the British army, he made a bungling attempt to employ a "scorched earth" policy, succeeding in burning the homes of the peaceful residents of Newark (modern Niagara-on-the-Lake) but not the barracks connected with the fort. America was to pay for his mistake. Earlier that year York, too, had been burned. The British hence were in no gentlemanly mood. The next year they were to burn Washington in retaliation.

Niagara Is Taken

But they did not wait until the next year to teach America a lesson. By a skillfully executed night attack, they took possession of Fort Niagara, bayoneting its defenders with scant mercy. Then they set out to treat Youngstown, Lewiston, Black Rock, and Buffalo as York and Newark had been treated.

The news brought panic to the settlements of the Genesee. Early in the morning of December 22 an express rider dashed up in front of the post office in Abelard Reynolds' house crying that Fort Niagara had fallen. The British—and worse, the Indians—were on their way. Lewiston and Youngstown had been burned, and every man was needed to defend Buffalo. The militia of this section were promptly ordered out. Down at Charlotte, nineteen-year-old George Latta for the first time since he had been working in Bushnell's store was absent without leave. With a week's provisions packed in his knapsack, and his rifle over his shoulder, he trudged westward over the Ridge Road until Frederick Hanford from Hanford's Landing overtook him at Parma Corners with a team and drove him and eleven others to Hardscrabble, six miles east of Lewiston.

They can have found little to encourage them. An eye-witness of the tragedy of Lewiston reported the scene that followed:

The citizens about Lewiston and its vicinity below the slope or highland that forms the Falls of Niagara, escaped by the Ridge Road towards Genesee Falls, all going the one road on foot, old and young, men, women, and children flying from their beds, some not more than half dressed, without shoes or stockings, together with men on horseback, wagons, carts, sleighs and sleds overturning and rushing each other, stimulated

by the horrid yells of the 900 savages on the pursuit, which lasted eight miles, formed a scene awful and terrific in the extreme. The small military force we had were the first to fly. . . . We have lost our all and the scene is over.²²

Hamlet Scrantom, safe in Rochester, could report more calmly:

On Sunday morning, the 19th, the British troops and Indians crossed the river at the five mile meadows; they proceeded to Fort Niagara, entered, and commenced the horrid massacre of the sick and wounded. . . . Our first accounts stated that all that came in their way were butchered without regard to age or sex, but it is not correct. But the distress of the inhabitants whose lot it was to fall into their hands is indescribable. Daily are passing here in sleighs and wagons, families deprived of their all. Not a cent of money, no provision, no bedding; children barefoot, etc., all depending on the charity of the people. The enemy continued their ravages from Sunday morning until Monday afternoon. . . . On Thursday morning an express arrived at break of day, that the enemy were landing from their boats at Oak Orchard Creek about forty miles from this and were proceeding this way desolating the country and it was expected another party would be in at the mouth of the Genesee River. All were alarmed. Some thought it best to be on the move; others did not apprehend danger. The militia were called upon to repair to the bridge and the mouth of the river; the whole country in confusion. Captain Stone (who keeps the tavern on the other side of the river) sent in all directions to assemble his company of dragoons (a very fine company), sent his children to Bloomsfield, and made preparations to move his most valuable effects at short notice. The merchants went to packing goods (of which there are four very full stores here), some running balls, others making cartridges. I yoked my oxen, packed up all our bedding and clothing and moved my family up to my log house on a back road about a mile from the bridge on the east side of the river, together with all my provisions and cooking utensils that were of immediate use. Before night our village was crowded with militia coming in all night and next; but the whole of this proved to be a false alarm; the enemy have never been but ten miles this side of Lewiston. The next week I moved back again to the village, and now rest secure, I think, for this winter. Israel [Scrantom's brother] and his family and one other family remained in the village all night, the rest crossed the river.²³

Meanwhile, at the other end of the lake, the American drive toward Montreal had again proved to be a fiasco. Postponed in order to make possible the conquests on the Niagara frontier, it was begun too late in the season, with too little understanding between the two forces supposedly co-operating. They retreated without ever effecting a junction, let alone making any determined attempt to overpower the enemy. Far from having gained successively York, Fort George, Kingston, and Montreal, as they had dreamed early in 1813, the Americans found at the end of the year that they had sacrificed Fort Niagara and permitted destructive raids upon the rest of the Niagara frontier. Lake Erie they held, and the end of the Niagara River nearest to Lake Erie, but on Lake Ontario they had lost much.

On the Genesee, the crisis of December 1813 brought about a stiffening in the attitude of the settlers toward the war, a determination to resist and to win. Now they had been threatened with invasion, not in the polite, painless fashion of the British raids on Charlotte, but with the full consequences of war. It was no longer Mr. Madison's war. The next time the enemy came to the mouth of the river they met with a different reception from the half-complacent attitude which had hitherto been the rule. Although the "Great Battle of Charlotte" of May 1814 was unimportant in a military sense, it marked quite definitely this changed attitude of the settlers, and hence is not unworthy perhaps of the lustre which has gathered about it in our local annals through the years.

After the Niagara invasion, the Genesee settlers expected "more bloodshed next summer than ever there has been on our frontier,"²⁴ and they took what measures they could to protect themselves. Two cannon, an eighteen-pounder and a four-pounder, were brought from the arsenal at Canandaigua and dragged over the muddy forest trails by seventeen yoke of oxen. A committee of safety, consisting of Hamlet Scrantom, Oliver Culver, Frederick Hanford, and Samuel Latta was organized for the double purpose of establishing a patrol along the lake shore and of preventing false rumors of enemy landings like that which had panicked the village in the winter. Isaac W. Stone, proprietor of the tavern at the east end of the bridge, together with Claudius V. Boughton of Pittsford and Abell Parkhurst of Lima raised a militia company of dragoons, which in May numbered

a little more than fifty men, though many of these came from the more distant inland sections of Lima and Bloomfield. Isaac Stone was colonel.

The fears of the settlers were by no means unjustified. The spring of 1814 found Commodore Chauncey and his fleet cooped up in Sackett's Harbor, hopefully waiting the day when they should have out-constructed the enemy. Two new ships were being built. Until the first was ready for service, early in June, Chauncey's British rival freely roamed the lake, when he was not actually engaged in blockading Sackett's Harbor. We may imagine that at this time the American army found it necessary to rely wholly upon its line of land communications, "bad but possible"—one feasible route going by Canandaigua, the bridge at Avon, and Batavia, to the Niagara frontier, another crossing the Genesee by the bridge at Rochester and following the Ridge Road to the same destination.

The Enemy Returns

Doubtless it was with the idea of interfering with the latter line of communication that Commodore Yeo, in May of 1814, again appeared off the mouth of the Genesee. Recently he had made a profitable raid on Oswego. American foresight, to be sure, had deprived him of the most coveted prize there, for the armament intended for the new ship then building at Sackett's Harbor had been safely stowed twelve miles upstream, at the falls of the Oswego River. Yet the British Commodore, after holding Oswego for a night, was able to make way with two small schooners, over two thousand barrels of provisions, a quantity of cordage, and nine heavy cannon as loot.

The stakes involved in the subsequent raid on the Genesee were apparently not so high, for the visit remains unmentioned in naval history. But the object was to carry off public stores (probably flour, pork, whisky) and perhaps, rumor had it, to destroy the bridge at Rochester.

The news of the raid upon Oswego had reached the Genesee before the British arrived. At Rochester and Charlotte preparations were speeded to resist attack. The eighteen-pounder was sent to Charlotte, the four-pounder to Deep Hollow—the ravine on the west

side of the river above the lower falls, which then made a formidable barrier across the road from the lake. Certain that the enemy would march toward Rochester, the villagers threw up a breastwork on the south side of this ravine and named it Fort Bender, after Hastings R. Bender who had suggested it. They loosened the planks in the rough wooden bridge across the hollow, preparatory to destroying it should the enemy approach. The Scrantom boys hid the family oxen in the swamp on the present site of Mumford Street and climbed the trees to watch for the signal for the women and children to go to safety in the woods.

At sundown on the 14th of May, the British fleet was sighted. Colonel Stone ordered every man in the village, about thirty in all, to hurry to the river mouth with powder and ball. They arrived at Charlotte shortly after daylight in the midst of a heavy fog. The lake was perfectly still, and the little band could hear the creaking of the rigging and the voices of the enemy invisible a mile or more out in the lake.

As the fog lifted, a boat from the fleet was seen coming toward the shore displaying a flag of truce. Unused to soldiering, Colonel Stone had no idea of the proper procedure and feared lest it mean a trick. He delegated Captain Francis Brown, the well-to-do part-owner of the Frankfort tract, to receive the British officer, with strict instructions not to let the enemy land. A short distance up the beach a large tree had fallen into the lake, and out on this crawled Brown, followed by Elisha Ely, the miller. The boat came along side and the British officer proposed going ashore for the parley. Brown and Ely positively refused, and pointed to twelve militia riflemen drawn up on shore to enforce the refusal. "Is it your custom to receive a flag of truce under arms?" exclaimed the puzzled officer. The militiamen were embarrassed at their ignorance of the rules of war, but they continued adamant in their refusal to permit him to land, and the officer delivered his message from the boat. In effect it was that the British commander, Sir James Yeo, would spare all private property provided the citizens surrendered the public stores. It was essentially the same procedure the settlers had acquiesced in twice before. But a change had taken place. Back went the spirited reply from Colonel Stone: "The public property is in the hands of those who will defend it."

By this time the numbers of the militia had been increased by volunteers from the settlements on the Ridge and from Pittsford. Twelve riflemen were sent across the river out of sight of the enemy under orders to hide behind a ridge of sand ready to open a cross fire on any boat sent into the river. A gunboat soon put out from the ships. On shore the cannon was loaded, the riflemen ready. The gunboat fired, and then in his excitement the man in charge of the cannon fired ahead of his orders. The boat was still far beyond range, and with this warning all hope of capturing her by surprise was gone. After firing a few more shots, she returned to the fleet.

So ended the great battle of the Genesee. For though the fleet did not leave the river mouth until the next day, there were no further hostilities. General Porter arrived from Canandaigua with some five or six hundred militia in the afternoon and took charge of refusing a second demand for the surrender of the stores. Yeo apparently considered that the prize was not worth the struggle, but as the settlers watched the fleet sail off toward Pultneyville, their morale soared to inflationary heights. So far as we know, the British Commodore never bothered to return.²⁵

Until late in July, his American rival sulked in his harbor, to the discomfiture of his country's forces on the Niagara frontier. When he did venture forth, however, he was soon able to embarrass the British communications seriously. Now it was Chauncey who kept Yeo cooped up, for a period of around six weeks, and who kept supplies from reaching the British forces at the mouth of the Niagara. The Americans, holding both sides of the river near Lake Erie, were seeking to regain lost ground to the north. To further this, three thousand men under General Izard were marched roundabout from Lake Champlain to Sackett's Harbor, and Chauncey carried them from that place to the mouth of the Genesee. After spending two nights there, rounding up means of transport, they marched to Lewiston, taking the Ridge Road "until it struck off to the left for Batavia," marching "through excessively bad roads and amidst continual and heavy rains."²⁶ This army afforded some co-operation to the Americans at Fort Erie, but later in the year that position was given up as untenable, the troops recrossing the Niagara. Only good fortune, meanwhile, repulsed a British attack on Lake Champlain. In October the British Commodore, having

improved the time by constructing the new and powerful *St. Lawrence*, found himself lord of the lake. Before he could be successfully challenged the next season, peace had been made.

Peace Is Made

For during the battles of the year 1814, a treaty had been negotiated between Britain and America. As early as January, when the settlers of the Genesee region had been caring for refugees from the devastated Niagara frontier, Congress had empowered American commissioners to meet directly with the British to discuss terms. It was July before the two groups actually met at Ghent, but meanwhile European events, which had once brought hostilities to peaceful Lake Ontario, took another turn which made those same hostilities unnecessary and futile. In April, with Napoleon's formal abdication, the great European duel had ended. "Blockade," "contraband," "impressment" became mere words, provocative of argument but scarcely worth bloodshed. American dreams of territorial expansion, thwarted by Britain even while she devoted her principal energies to the defeat of Napoleon, could hardly be realized now that her hands were untied. It seems strange, indeed, that Britain did not now turn against the States in vengeance. But Britain's main interest was still not the chastisement of her rebellious offspring but the maintenance of peace in Europe. There were concessions which she was anxious to wring from the American commissioners if she could do so easily, but they did not seem worth any titanic military efforts.

Oddly enough, the strange, indecisive naval conflict on Lake Ontario seems to have contributed to Britain's willingness to make peace. There were men in England who wished the great Duke of Wellington to sail for America to whip the upstart nation into submission. But the Duke pointed out that this could not be done without first securing control of the Great Lakes. That control must depend not upon the numbers and discipline of British troops but upon Canadian ship-building. Hence it would be difficult to obtain. The prize would not be worth the effort.²⁷

Perhaps, after all, the echoes of the great battle of Charlotte had reached Europe. A British commander might rule the inland waters for a time, but a handful of resolute Genesee settlers, reinforced by

Peter B. Porter's now-disciplined militia, could help to keep him at bay until American ship-builders once more tipped the balance. In the long run America, outstripping her northern neighbor in population and material resources, must win that campaign. The British had the good sense to acknowledge the fact. They were comforted by the assurance that on the ocean they could as easily outstrip the Americans. If American troops wantonly burned York, British forces could retaliate at Washington.

Since the dice were thus loaded, there was no particular reason to continue the game. There were many points still at issue, to be sure. The commissioners of the two nations discussed and rediscussed them from July to December. In the end, most of them were still unsettled, but a satisfactory treaty was made at Ghent even so. "This was not," says A. L. Burt, "because the authors of the treaty had ignored the questions. These men had wrestled with them desperately but had been able to do nothing with them except leave them. Their failure was perhaps fortunate, for it meant that the treaty did nothing that had to be undone, which is more than can be said for many treaties of peace, and that the problems it left unsolved were settled in an atmosphere of peace rather than of war."²⁸

In that atmosphere, for example, the naval race for predominance upon the Great Lakes was ended. At the time of the Peace of Ghent, the British attempted to bully the Americans into disarming along the lakes frontier, leaving the British free to act as they chose. But by 1817 they recognized the futility of such an attempt. Even with a headstart the British could not hope to keep naval superiority there if hostilities should break out with America. Why, then, bother to keep a fleet there at all? They agreed, therefore, that each nation should limit its naval force on the Great Lakes border to four vessels, of stipulated size, one on Lake Champlain, one on Lake Ontario, and two on the upper lakes, these to be employed in the enforcement of revenue laws, the transport of troops, and similar duties.

Thus Lake Ontario became once more an avenue of commerce rather than the scene of battle. This had not happened because the nations on its shores had no disputes. Our whole northern boundary, from Maine to Oregon, was the subject of disagreement between Britain and the United States. Neither the laws of Nature

nor historical precedent gave any clear verdict as to the proper extent of Maine or Minnesota—but the will to peace of kindred peoples, taught by bitter experience the necessity of compromise, drew those boundary lines, even as it had written the Peace of Ghent and later renounced naval efforts on the lakes.

It would be sentimental to suppose that the inhabitants of Rochester foresaw this when, in February of 1815, they celebrated the news of peace. Doubtless what they felt as they sent their cannon joyfully thundering from the top of Brighton hill was an overwhelming sense of relief. Now they might go back to their day-by-day pursuits without fear of hostile interruption. Now they would no longer be torn between patriotic duty and individual self-interest. Now their settlement would have a chance to grow.

But the absence of bitterness in their jubilation did indeed foreshadow a lasting peace. Like the rest of the American people, they were willing to forget. Symbolically, the express mail coach which brought the glad tidings to Canandaigua had flown an American and a British flag, side by side.

NOTES

¹ Lord Sheffield, 1784, quoted in A. T. Mahan, *Sea Power in its Relations to the War of 1812* (Boston, 1905), vol. I, p. 47.

² For detailed exposition of the opposing views, see Julius W. Pratt, *Expansionists of 1812* (New York, 1925) and A. L. Burt, *The United States, Great Britain, and British North America from the Revolution to the Establishment of Peace after the War of 1812* (New Haven, 1940).

³ Burt, *op. cit.*, p. 305.

⁴ James Monroe to Colonel John Taylor, June 13, 1812, quoted in Pratt, *op. cit.*, p. 159.

⁵ Burt, *op. cit.*, p. 310.

⁶ Pratt, *op. cit.*, pp. 174-175.

⁷ Fred Landon, *Western Ontario and the American Frontier* (Toronto, 1941), pp. 30-31.

⁸ Private journal of DeWitt Clinton, August 3, 1810, in William W. Campbell, *Life and Writings of DeWitt Clinton* (New York, 1849).

⁹ Account for the year 1805 by Joseph Ellicott in Holland Land Company's Papers, Buffalo Historical Society Publications, vol. XXXII, p. 273.

¹⁰ Benson John Lossing, *Pictorial Field-Book of the War of 1812* (New York [1896]), pp. 231-232; Mahan, *op. cit.*, vol. II, pp. 111, 113.

¹¹ Mahan, *op. cit.*, vol. II, p. 51.

¹² Mahan, *op. cit.*, vol. I, pp. 308, 339.

¹³ Lossing, *op. cit.*, p. 365.

¹⁴ Franklin Hanford, "Visits of American and British Naval Vessels to the Genesee River, 1809 to 1814," Rochester Historical Society Publications, vol. III, p. 41; Lossing, *op. cit.*, p. 371; Mahan, *op. cit.*, vol. I, p. 363.

¹⁵ Hanford, *loc. cit.*, pp. 41-42.

¹⁶ Mahan, *op. cit.*, vol. II, p. 50.

¹⁷ Hanford, *loc. cit.*, pp. 41-42.

¹⁸ Mahan, *op. cit.*, vol. II, pp. 51-61, 106-109.

¹⁹ Turner, *Phelps and Gorham's Purchase*, quoted in Hanford, *loc. cit.*, p. 52.

²⁰ Hanford, *loc. cit.*, pp. 46-52.

²¹ Mahan, *op. cit.*, vol. II, pp. 52-53.

²² Jonas Harrison, collector of customs for the District of Niagara, December 24, 1813, in Louis L. Babcock, *The War of 1812 on the Niagara Frontier*, Buffalo Historical Society Publications, vol. XXVIII, pp. 128-129.

²³ Hanford, *loc. cit.*, p. 54.

²⁴ Hamlet Scrantom to his father, Rochester, Feb. 19, 1814, Rochester Historical Society Publications, vol. VII, p. 186.

²⁵ Hanford, *loc. cit.*, pp. 54-64.

²⁶ Mahan, *op. cit.*, vol. II, pp. 320-321; Hanford, *loc. cit.*, p. 64.

²⁷ Mahan, *op. cit.*, vol. II, pp. 429-430.

²⁸ A. L. Burt, *A Short History of Canada for Americans* (Minneapolis, 1942), p. 106.

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